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ABSTRACT

Feminist therapy, a form of psychotherapy which reflects an androgynous view of sex roles, strives to identify the constraints of traditional sex role expectations and to help women take control of their lives. Women's studies courses may also achieve similar goals. Female students (N=32) enrolled in a psychology of women course were tested to assess changes in their loci of control, sex role orientation, and level of conceptual complexity. In the two testing sessions, conducted eight weeks apart, students completed the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI), the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale for Adults (ANS-IE), and the Paragraph Completion Test (PCT). Results showed that subjects exhibited a shift toward greater internality on the ANS-IE and greater masculinity on the BSRI; no change occurred in conceptual complexity as indicated by PCT scores. Results suggest that exposure to the course elicits changes in the content of students' cognitions about themselves, rather than in the structure of their cognitive processes. (NRB)

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CHANGING WOMEN'S SELF-PERCEPTIONS:
The Impact of a Psychology of Women Course

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Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Association for Women in Psychology, Boston, MA, March 5-8, 1981.

Changing women's self-perceptions: The impact of a psychology of women course

Traditional views of psychological well-being have emphasized the importance of adopting the gender role appropriate to one's sex. However, an increasingly popular view today is that persons, particularly women, who rigidly adhere to roles reflecting cultural stereotypes of masculinity and femininity not only limit their opportunities for self expression, but may be prone to developing symptoms of psychological maladjustment (e.g., Gove, 1980; Bart, 1971). Proponents of this view see that breaking free of culturally imposed sex role constraints is psychologically advantageous. For instance, Bem (1976) maintains that women can avoid the "high anxiety and poor social adjustment" associated with femininity by becoming psychologically androgynous. Furthermore, Kaplan (1976) has suggested that androgyny be used as a model for mental health.

Two forms of psychotherapeutic intervention which have been developed for women clients reflect this new view of sex roles. The first, known as feminist therapy, teaches women to differentiate between the components of their problems which arise from intrapersonal conflicts and those which can be attributed to society's expectations about female sex roles (e.g., Wykoff, 1977). Similar lessons are taught in the second form of intervention, the consciousness raising group, in which women see that their problems are shared by other women (Brodsky, 1973).

A major goal of the androgynous and/or feminist mental health movement is to alert women to the constraints of traditional sex role expectations. One method for achieving this goal, which does not fall within the rubric of psychotherapy, is education in the form of women's studies courses.

Ruble, Croke, Frieze and Parsons (1975), and Vedovato and Vaughter (1980) report that exposure to women's studies courses results in changes in students' attitudes about women as well as shifts in students' masculinity and femininity scores on the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI). Not only do attitudes shift toward greater liberalism with respect to women's issues, but students' self descriptions shift from traditional orientations toward a more androgynous orientation. Thus, women's studies courses appear to affect change of the sort recommended by feminist therapists.

A second goal of feminist therapists and leaders of women's self-help groups is to help women take control over their own lives. Women tend, to a greater degree than men, to believe that they are externally controlled, that is, they see their lives being controlled by factors over which they have no influence. This set of beliefs, known as externality, has been linked with anxiety, depression and general dysphoria (Lefcourt, 1976). Clearly, a shift toward greater internality in female clients would be considered a positive change in feminist therapy. An important question in the current investigation was whether such a shift would occur in female students as a result of their exposure to a psychology of women course.

It was hypothesized that women students in a large Canadian University, which does not have a women's studies program, would, upon exposure to a psychology of women course, change their beliefs about themselves. It was expected that the course would challenge these students' attitudes concerning the role of women in society. Therefore, it was predicted that, from the beginning to the end of the course, students would exhibit a shift toward internality in their locus of control scores, and a shift away from a traditional sex role orientation.

In addition to replicating the findings of Vedovato and Vaughter (1980) and extending their study to include information about subjects' perceptions of control, this study examined whether students' information processing style changed as a result of exposure to the course. The question of concern here was whether the structure of these students' thought processes, or merely the content of their thought (that is, their attitudes and self-perceptions), would be affected by this experience.

In order to test this hypothesis, a measure of conceptual complexity developed by Schroder, Driver and Streufert (1967) was included in the study. The test measures subjects' ability to differentiate and integrate information from the environment. Differentiation is the ability to use a number of bipolar constructs when interpreting a given stimulus and integration is the ability to use a number of rules to combine these constructs (Streufert & Streufert, 1978). It was hypothesized that by challenging students' beliefs about themselves, they would begin to differentiate and integrate information from their environments in a more complex fashion.

In summary, the study was designed to assess changes in female students' perceptions of their locus of control and sex role orientation, as well as changes in their level of conceptual complexity which were accrued as a function of exposure to a psychology of women course.

Method

Subjects

Thirty-two female students enrolled in the course entitled "Psychology of Women" participated in the study. This was a summer evening credit course open to both full and part-time students. Only those students present at

both the pre- and post-sessions were included in the study. The mean age of these students was 33.67 years, SD = 7.03, and their mean year of registration in university was 2.78, SD = .73.

Procedure

Students participated in two testing sessions, the first of which took place in the third class meeting, and the second occurred eight weeks later when the course was nearing completion. Prior to the first session students were told that the data were being collected as part of a large scale study concerned with students' attitudes. Following the second test session the students were debriefed as to the purpose of the study and they were given information which enabled them to interpret their own test scores.

In each testing session the students filled out the BSRI (Bem, 1974), the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale for Adults (ANS-IE) (Nowicki & Duke, Note 1), and the Paragraph Completion Test (PCT) (Schroder et al., 1967).

Course Credit

The course, which was based on a lecture format, was designed to provoke discussion both among students and between students and the instructor. The topics included: sex differences, androgyny, traditional and feminist approaches to psychotherapy with women, female sexuality, childrearing, marriage, domestic violence, rape, pornography, sexual harassment, and womens' career development. Evaluation was based on two essays, each of which was conducted on a topic of the students' choice. and two book reviews. The essay topics and books to be reviewed were selected by the student in consultation with the instructor. There were no examinations in the course.

The evaluation format was chosen deliberately to encourage the students to take responsibility for their own learning. In other words, by researching

topics and books of their own choice, students were expected to learn in order to please themselves, as much as to please the instructor.

Dependent Measures

The Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI). The BSRI consists of a list of sixty adjectives: twenty masculine, twenty feminine and twenty neutral. Respondents are to rate themselves on each adjective on a seven-point rating scale ranging from 1 (never or almost never true) to 7 (always or almost always true). The scale yields a masculinity and a femininity score.

Test-retest reliability over a four week period was .90 for both the masculinity and femininity scores (Bem, 1974). Validity studies indicate that males score higher than females on the masculinity scale, and that the converse is true for the femininity scale (Beere, 1979).

The Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale for Adults (ANS-IE). The ANS-IE is a forty-item test designed to assess perceived locus of control. The ANS-IE does not correlate with either social desirability or intelligence. It has a split-half reliability of from .74 to .86, and test-retest reliability of .83 over a six-week period (Nowicki & Duke, Note 1).

The Paragraph Completion Test (PCT). The PCT was designed to give a "content free" measure of integrative complexity primarily in the area of interpersonal affairs (Gardiner & Schroder, 1972). It is a semi-projective test composed of five sentence stems, e.g., "When I am in doubt...". Subjects are given 130 seconds to complete the stem and to write an additional three sentences about it.

The scoring procedure is based on the structural components of the subject's response and scores can range from 1 to 7 for each paragraph. Low scores reflect low differentiation and integration, high scores reflect high

differentiation and integration. Each subjects' score is determined by the average of the two highest scores on the individual sentence stems.

Performance on the PCT has been shown to be largely unrelated to intelligence test scores, social desirability and verbal fluency, particularly in college populations (Bottenberg, 1969). In addition, numerous studies have supported the construct validity of the PCT measure (see Schroder, 1971).

Results

The first hypothesis tested here concerned the relationship between locus of control and exposure to the course. A t-test was conducted on the locus of control scores collected from test sessions one ($\bar{X}$ = 8.66, SD = 3.36) and test session two ($\bar{X}$ = 6.90, SD = 4.14), t (30) = 3.67, $p < .0005$, one-tailed These results indicate that, as expected, subjects scored significantly more internally in the second test session than in the first test session.

The second hypothesis concerned the expected shift in masculinity scores from the beginning to the end of the course. These results, which are presented in Table 1, indicate that subjects shifted toward significantly higher masculinity scores from the beginning to the end of the course. Although not statistically significant, it should be noted that subjects' femininity scores were somewhat lower by the end of the course.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Finally, the results obtained for the PCT measure of conceptual complexity revealed no significant changes from the first ($\bar{X}$ = 1.72, SD = .82) to the second testing session ($\bar{X}$ = 1.80, SD = .72), t (30) = .45.

Table 1

Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) scores as a function of test session

BSRI scores	Test session one	Test session two	$t(30)$*	p
Masculinity	$\bar{X}$ = 93.33	$\bar{X}$ = 98.54	-1.78	< .05
	SD = 20.59	SD = 12.67		
Femininity	$\bar{X}$ = 94.78	$\bar{X}$ = 92.15	1.51	< .10
	SD = 9.17	SD = 11.34		

* one-tailed

Correlation coefficients were calculated in order to test the degree of relationship between the measures administered to subjects at each testing session. See Table 2 for these results. As indicated by the low coefficients obtained between these measures, each seems to be tapping an independent characteristic.

Insert Table 2 About Here

In summary, subjects exhibited a shift toward greater internality on the ANS-IE and greater masculinity on the BSRI from the beginning to the end of the psychology of women course. They did not, however, exhibit any change in their conceptual complexity as indicated by their scores on the PCT.

Discussion

The results of this investigation revealed that, as expected, female students who were exposed to a psychology of women course changed their views of themselves. By the end of the course they expressed greater masculinity on the BSRI, and indicated greater internality on the ANS-IE measure of locus of control. However, they did not show a shift in their information processing style, or level of conceptual complexity. Thus, exposure to this course elicited changes in the content, of these students' cognitions about themselves, rather than in the structure of their cognitive processes.

These findings have several interesting implications, the most important of which concerns the women's mental health movement. Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz and Vogel (1970) revealed that unlike characteristics associated with femininity, characteristics associated with the masculine gender role are consistent with those which counsellors and clinicians would expect to find in a mentally healthy person. Furthermore, having an internal

Table 2

Correlation coefficients (r) between dependent measures as a function of test session

Test Session One

	ANS-IE	BSRI (MASC)	BSRI (FEM)	PCT
ANS-IE	--	-.10	-.01	-.21
BSRI (MASC.)		--	--	.22
BSRI (FEM.)			--	-.15
PCT				--

Test Session Two

	ANS-IE	BSRI (MASC)	BSRI (FEM)	PCT
ANS-IE	--	-.17	.08	-.07
BSRI (MASC.)		--	--	.15
BSRI (FEM.)			--	-.22
PCT				--

locus of control is positively associated with mental health (Lefcourt, 1976). Thus, given the changes noted in the students who participated in this study, it appears that exposure to women's studies courses may facilitate women's mental health. In other words, the didactic, educative approach to identifying sex-role constraints may be helpful to women in much the same way as are feminist therapy and consciousness raising groups.

It is interesting to note that the changes observed in this study took place in a sample of women who were somewhat older than those normally tested in college samples. The age factor is important because, as reported by Bers (1980), young women (eighteen years old) tend to be more nontraditional in sex role attitudes than women returning to the university community (thirty-nine year olds). Thus, it seems that womens' studies courses can be just as impactful for older women as for those who are younger. It should be noted that in the Vedovato and Vaughter (1980) paper in which masculinity but not femininity scores were changed through exposure to a psychology of women course, the age of the students was not reported. It is possible, therefore, that the mild tendency for femininity scores to drop which was observed in the present sample was a function of age, in that these subjects may have been older than those included in the Vedovato and Vaughter study.

A further methodological issue raised by this study concerns the labelling of locus of control and sex role orientation as personality variables.[1] Traditionally, the term "personality variable" has been used to describe a relatively enduring characteristic within an individual which is not readily subject to change as a result of environmental variables. This view is reflected in the concern

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[1] Similar concerns to those expressed here have been raised by Worell (1978).

exhibited by authors of personality tests over whether their tests are high in test-retest reliability. High reliability of this sort indicates that the test measures something constant within the individual. Obviously, in the current investigation, the constancy of such "traits" as locus of control and sex-role orientation was interrupted by environmental variables. This suggests that perhaps unlike the PCT, the BSRI and ANS-IE reflect more about the individual's beliefs about herself than some fixed personality characteristic.

This issue raises the question of social desirability and its role in the respondents' behavior in this study. Although both the ANS-IE and BSRI are considered relatively safe from the influence of social desirability, it is possible that the shift in scores noted in this sample, and in those of Vedovato and Vaughter (1980) and Ruble et al. (1975), reflects the students' response to a shift in expectations about sex-role desirability. It has been suggested for example, by Jackson and Paunonen (1980), that sex-role orientation scores may reflect a differential endorsement of the desirability content of masculine and feminine items. In psychology of women courses taught by self-identified feminists, students may perceive considerable demand to exhibit characteristics or beliefs which may not be highly valued in most of the other circumstances of their lives. It would be interesting, therefore, to begin data collection on behavioral indices of sex role orientation and locus of control which could be monitored outside the classroom. It is clear that if shifts in students' self-perceptions are not accompanied by any behavioral changes, we cannot be totally confident about the impact of women's studies courses on women students' mental health.

Reference Notes

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